

# INTRODUCTION

## LIVING MYTH

It is a rare thing being able to study a setting of living myth, with numerous contemporary commentators to it, people writing in that setting at the very time of the myth's flourishing. Thereby, several important questions can be answered, such as: What roles do the myths play in their life? Do they regard the myths as perfectly accurate recounts of past events? Do they see the myths as trustworthy guides in the present? How do they interpret and understand them?

Of course, this study can be done – at least orally – in a number of societies around the world where the myths are still integrated with social life and not marginalized or defeated by cosmologies of other kinds. On the other hand, in such societies – for example, the many remaining hunter-gatherer cultures – the local commentators are extremely difficult for the outside observer to understand with any certainty. It is also possible that their language contains few terms for analyzing their traditions in any alternative way.

Language and thought are bound to the framework of the society they belong to. This is particularly true about cultures without writing, which is the tool for analytical discussion continued through time. Oral tradition can keep impressive amounts of information relatively intact for generations, but with little abstraction or theoretical reasoning.<sup>1</sup> Stories are easily kept and repeated, but not speculations about them.

Even if their language and minds are apt to it, what's to guarantee that it's not lost in translation? It has proven

<sup>1</sup> About the nature of oral contrary to written tradition, see Ong, Walter J., *Orality and Literacy. Technologizing of the Word*, London 1982.

difficult enough for outside observers to digest local myths and cosmologies. To follow local discussions on their objective value and accuracy, if such conversations are at all possible, would be quite complex.

Already to find a trustworthy local source is no easy matter. The brothers Villas Boas spent as much as 25 years with the Xingu Indians in Brazil. Still, they confessed to this problem:

*One of the most difficult things in obtaining this kind of data is to find the best informant. An Indian who speaks our language well and who readily offers to tell us stories or reveal information is precisely the least trustworthy for this purpose. True informants never come forward on their own, they speak only their own language, and when they are questioned, they even draw back. Furthermore, there are never more than one or two true trustees of the spiritual culture in each village.<sup>2</sup>*

Even if the people in question is as willing as ever to share its thoughts, and the listener is all ears, problems appear. French anthropologist Marcel Griaule was by the tribe elders allowed an introduction to the Dogon people's cosmology. His teacher was Ogotemmêli, one of the elders, who estimated that it would take years to complete the teaching. On one of those lectures, Griaule reacted to an inconsistency in the cosmological structure described. Ogotemmêli had told him about a small celestial surface, which had more animals than there could possibly be room for. Ogotemmêli was quick to reply:

*"All this had to be said in words," said Ogotemmêli, "but everything on the steps is a symbol, symbolic antelopes, symbolic vultures, symbolic hyenas." He paused for a moment, and added: "Any number of symbols could find room on a one-cubit step."*

<sup>2</sup> Villas Boas, Orlando & Claudio, *Xingu: the Indians, their Myths*, translated by Susana Hertelendy Rudge, London 1974, p.49f.

*For the word 'symbol' he used a composite expression, the literal meaning of which is 'word of this (lower) world'.<sup>3</sup>*

About the multifaceted problem of interpretation, the influential Historian of Religion Mircea Eliade wrote:

*When, in one or two generations, perhaps even earlier, we have historians of religions who are descended from Australian, African or Melanesian tribal societies, I do not doubt that, among other things, they will reproach Western scholars for their indifference to the scale of values indigenous to these societies.<sup>4</sup>*

That, we are still waiting for. Furthermore, it's no guarantee. The prominent anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard was even more pessimistic about our ability to correctly perceive the belief systems of those cultures:

*Statements about a people's religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words, which require for understanding a thorough knowledge of a people's language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas of which any particular belief is part".<sup>5</sup>*

In the same paragraph he warns: "speaking a language fluently is very different from understanding it".

## **REALITY**

We must remind ourselves that the idea of reality as something separate from myth is not necessarily shared by other cultures – actually not even by our own, as it was just centuries ago, or for that matter still might be in certain aspects that we do not ourselves notice.

<sup>3</sup>Griaule, Marcel, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: an Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas (Dieu d'eau: entretiens avec Ogotemmêli, 1948)*, London 1965, p.37.

<sup>4</sup>Eliade, Mircea, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago 1969, p.75.

<sup>5</sup>Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford 1965, p.7.

Basically, it's all in the mind. What we perceive and how we relate to it comes first for every person in any culture. Objective facts, separate from our perception, are relevant to us only if we have some use for them or need to relate to them in some way. Therefore, we all tend to regard as real that which fits our needs the best.

Myths always speak of past events, particularly so creation myths. Since the past is no longer present, it tends to be regarded in a way that is the most appreciated at the time. Our modern society is no exception. We analyze myth as well as history with the tools of our own time.

The whole notion of objective fact as something contrary to and separable from the imaginary, and putting great value on a distinction between the two, is a western thing. It has not even been consistently observed through our history. We cannot assume that this has been done as vigorously in other societies, as it has in ours for the last hundred years or so.

When examining the myths of a culture very different from our own, we should also try to grasp its attitudes to reality as opposed to imagination, fact as opposed to fiction, their use and interpretation of symbols, and so forth.

Not an easy task, but nonetheless essential if we are to get some kind of understanding of the role of myth in other cultures. Maybe we have little hope of perceiving any more than what those alien myths seem to mean to us. Maybe myth is impenetrable to someone outside of the society in which it is kept, and within that society it is impossible to distance oneself from its myths. Either the forest or the trees – never both.

It would be much easier to approach people's intellectual relations to their myths closer to home, so to speak. And this can be done – with the Greeks of ancient times.



*Achilles with a Gorgon headed shield. Terracotta relief from about 600 BC. The Gorgons were female monsters. A man turned into stone by looking at a Gorgon's face.*